

MLA JULIE GREEN – YELLOWKNIFE CENTRE – IN THE MEDIA

Surprise and confusion over replacement of Aurora College's president

By: KATE KYLE

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'He did seem like the right person for the job,' says Yellowknife Centre MLA of outgoing president

At least two politicians in the Northwest Territories say they're "concerned" and "surprised" after learning the man who had been hired to transform Aurora College into a polytechnic university has been replaced less than a year after taking the job.

The N.W.T. government announced in a news release Tuesday that Tom Weegar was no longer the college president or the associate deputy minister of post-secondary renewal. Andy Bevan will now take on both roles.

"He did seem like the right person for the job," Julie Green, MLA for Yellowknife Centre, said of Weegar.

"I was surprised.... I didn't get any indication that this change was coming," said Green, who described Weegar's academic qualifications as "impressive." She said Weegar also had relevant experience with Indigenous communities.

The news release offered no explanation for the change in leadership.

'College really needs to be independent,' says MLA

"I'm concerned that a change in leadership is going to result in a perception that momentum is being lost because the work that was underway is now going to be under different leadership," Green said.

She also worries about the perception that Weegar's replacement was appointed from within the government.

Bevan helped spearhead a skills training framework for the Department of Education, Culture and Employment. He's also a former acting deputy minister of Aboriginal Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations.

"I am a little concerned that by choosing to fill the position from within, that that will perpetuate — at least the perception — that ECE [Education, Culture and Employment] is very involved in the college, where the college really needs to be independent," Green said.

The 2018 Aurora College Foundational Review recommended ways to give the college more independence from government.

Upheaval at the college

Green noted upheaval at Aurora College in recent years.

"The board was dismissed, the president was dismissed. There was an acting supervisory role, then a new president was put into the role and he's been dismissed after a year, from what we can tell," she said.

"There seems to be a lot of turmoil over there, and turmoil isn't the best circumstance for getting on with a big project like transforming the college into a university."

Yellowknife Coun. Julian Morse, a vocal advocate for establishing a university in the N.W.T. capital, and chair of the city's university/post-secondary advisory committee, was also caught off-guard by the change in leadership.

"This seems like a step out of that direction," he said, referring to making the college more independent from the government. He said he's waiting for more information about future plans.

"It's an opportunity to bring a lot of people here who are studying the North," said Morse.

"The potential for this as an aspirational project is huge, and I do have concerns that, you know, the longer this stays directly in the government's hands, the less chance [there is] of it being as big as it could be."

CBC News asked the territorial government for more details on why Weegar was replaced, but did not get a response before publication. CBC also attempted to reach Weegar for comment, but did not hear back on Tuesday.